

H-France Review Vol. 7 (August 2007), No. 93

Ben Ramm, *A Discourse for the Holy Grail in Old French Romance*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007. x + 182 pp. Bibliography and index. \$85. ISBN 1-84384-109-6.

Review by Amy L. Ingram, Northern Illinois University.

Medievalists have long debated the utility of modern theory when applied to medieval texts. Is it feasible to apply, for instance, psychoanalytic writings to a literary genre that precedes their existence by centuries? Reminiscent in some ways of the new medievalism movement of the 1990s, Ramm's work does just that, offering a highly theoretical psychoanalytical study of French Grail romances that focuses primarily on *La Queste del saint graal* and the *Perlesvaus*. Jacques Lacan provides the main theoretical framework for the present study, and more specifically, it is through Lacan's theory of discourse that Ramm attempts to construct his own discourse of the grail.

Ramm's book is divided into four chapters, all of which correspond to one of the four discourse models proposed in the Lacanian discourse theory. According to Ramm, "each one of four discourse models identified by Lacan (the discourses of the Master, the University, the Hysteric, and the Analyst) is presented as an algorithm consisting of four positions and four terms" (p. 13). Ramm explores how various aspects of the Grail romances relate to each of Lacan's mathemes. Chapter one takes on the early thirteenth-century *Perlesvaus*, which Ramm associates with Lacan's discourse of the Master, whereas chapter two analyzes the *Queste del saint graal* and the manner in which it exemplifies the discourse of the University. Chapters Three and Four focus comparatively on both texts but apply to them the discourses of the Hysteric and the Analyst respectively.

In chapter one, the author examines the relationship between identity, abjection, and misrecognition in the *Perlesvaus*, illustrating at the same time how the formation and continuity of identity in this text differ significantly from the Aristotelian teachings concerning man and his conception of self. As Ramm maintains, "here the master signifier (S1) in which the subjects (i.e., the characters) heavily invest is represented by the notion of a stable, consistent subjectivity—an *identity* that would adequately represent the subject to himself and to others within a complex network of signifiers" (p. 16). His reading of the romance centers, in this chapter, on identity formation and its two-poled temporal dimension, along with the connection between death and identity. It is, in fact, the narrative's "obsession with notions of death" in the context of identity formation that anticipates "certain modern psychoanalytic and philosophical concerns" (p. 32). In addition to Lacan, Ramm incorporates Slavoj Zizek's concepts of identity into his reading of the *Perlesvaus*, turning as well to Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection.

The theme of identity continues in chapter two, with the focus shifting to *La Queste del saint graal*, which, according to Ramm, "might be read as a response to the failure of attempts to stabilize identity in the *Perlesvaus*" (p. 61). He stresses the role of Galahad as subject, but as a subject whose identity awaits him and one who must therefore attempt to fit the mold of that identity, which in turn helps to shape the identity of other members of the Arthurian court. The central premise of his argument in this section revolves around the dichotomy between earthly and celestial chivalry, two competing value systems in the romance that Ramm rejects as being mutually exclusive. Celestial chivalry is, as Ramm claims, constructed as a paradox by the narrative itself and presented as unattainable. The author explores these various notions in terms of Lacan's discourse of the University.

The discourse of the Hysteric, “dominated by the split in the subject who assumes the position of the agent,” (p. 20) proffers the foundation for Chapter Three. Therein, Ramm considers the relationship between sin and the Grail, first by analyzing two parallel episodes in the *Queste* and the *Perlesvaus*: Lancelot’s confession. The role of the body in relation to sin is of central importance in this chapter, as is the thematization of sin. Although the *Queste* and the *Perlesvaus* remain at the center of Ramm’s study here, he also integrates Robert de Boron’s *Joseph d’Arimathie* into his discussion, a romance that, according to him, lacks both a subject and an Other. Along with Lacan, Julia Kristeva’s modern perspective on the concept of sin, together with Roland Barthes’ distinction between *lisible* and *scriptible* texts, figures prominently in this section.

Chapter four focuses on “concepts of alienation and separation, the two operations which, for Lacan, define the subject’s relationship to the Other, as they are enacted in the Grail narratives” (p. 23). The theme of dreaming, an important one in many medieval texts, is used here as a tool to illustrate this discourse, which necessitates the inclusion of Freud. Ramm begins this chapter by citing one of Freud’s dream cases (the *Dream of the Burning Child*) and, through the Lacanian discourse of the Analyst, transposes the scenario presented by Freud onto specific dreams of “suspended subjectivity” from the *Queste* and the *Perlesvaus*, paying particular attention to the form of the dreams, as well as to their content. A sub-section of Chapter Four applies Macrobius’s medieval work on the state of dreaming to a particular type of dream found in the prose Grail romances, the ecstatic dream that Ramm describes as “a locus of subjective destitution, defined by Lacan as the withdrawal of the subject from the domain of the other” (p. 126). He goes on to specify two distinct types of destitution in the context of Grail romances, the physical trauma found in the *Perlesvaus* and the spiritual void associated with the *Queste*.

Ramm’s Conclusion examines the lack of closure in the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste* through analysis of the death of the two heroes. According to the author, “the Lacanian theory of discourse is always problematized by its remainder, a remainder that lies both inside and outside the discourse structure, a remainder that is therefore undecidable and abject” (p. 149). Ramm’s analyses lead him to conclude that this remainder accounts for the lack of narrative closure in the romances and ultimately that “the discourse of the Grail is fundamentally abject rather than ever fully identifiable with any one of Lacan’s four hegemonic discourse permutations” (p. 158). Such a conclusion prompts this reviewer to wonder whether or not the author actually succeeds in constructing his *Discourse for the Holy Grail in Old French Romance*.

Anchored heavily in theory, the present study is certainly unique in its approach to the Grail romances. At times, however, Ramm’s theoretical framework overshadows his reading of the texts, obscuring his analyses and making them difficult to follow. In some cases, the application of certain theories to medieval texts seems out of place or at least in need of further explanation to make their relevance more apparent to the reader. This study will likely leave medievalists divided, since, as noted above, some are hesitant to accept the application of modern theory to medieval literature. Moreover, because the author assumes a thorough understanding of and appreciation for modern theory, his book is most suited for seasoned scholars who possess both. This reviewer does not recommend the book for undergraduates, though it may be accessible to graduate students trained well in theory. Despite its shortcomings, Ramm’s work offers a fresh reading of medieval Grail romances and provides us with a new way of thinking about this particular body of literature.

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ISSN 1553-9172